School of Hard Knocks

Bobby worked with his dad since the age of 7. Small enough to squeeze into cesspools, haul garbage, shovel coal and ashes from cellars – Bobby rarely attended school clean. It was 1938 and Frank needed his boy to start earning a living.

"Basically, I had to work by crawling into these enclosed areas that were about the size of, oh god, about 10 x 12, enclosed area made out of brick or concrete. People'd throw ashes in from their commercial places that burned slack. And ashes were always HOT. Red hot, you'd see um glow. And I was supposed to be inside. And, my dad used to like to tease me, because I wanted to get the job done so I could get the hell outta there. Cause my feet were always hot, burning hot. And he's started to tease me and I'd get madder than hell. So, I'd start shoveling as fast as I could, and that'd literally bury my dad in ashes. He's start hollering they were too damn hot. 'What the hell you'd expect!' Still, he liked to tease me to make me mad. When I'd get through, then I'd have to help him finish loading the truck up with ashes, cause – shit, he didn't have ½ of um in. He'd start teasing me again enough to get me mad and shove him back into the damn ashes. He burned his ass pretty good that time."

"I actually started hauling ashes with him when I was 8 years old. I went to school an average of 2 days a week." (Because his dad pulled him out of class to work with him). "*I was a straight F student. I don't think that records ever been broke. It was a rotten job. Damn shoes would get so brittle that, hell, you couldn't use um. They weren't even my size, they were always shoes from the dump – men's shoes, not kid's shoes."*

"I was in the coal mines since I was 7. I was digging and loading coal by hand and shovel. It was a dirty job, and I'd get like the coal miners get – filthy. That's the way I'd go to school. Mrs. Moser would get all pissed at my dad, then take me downstairs, strip me down and wash me…embarrassing as hell."

"She was my first-grade teacher, Mrs. Moser, she was from Holland. True hardcore Dutch. I loved the way she used to, uh, uh weave and braid her hair – in a circle on top of her head. She was blond and she became my most famous teacher; wonderful, wonderful woman. She knew me and my dad cuz we used to haul her trash also. That's what dad did was haul trash, for anybody. They'd call him and say, 'well Frank, we need you to come pick up our garbage,' or whatever. That's what I… what we'd do. We get there and I'm the one who had to get all that stinkin crap up on the truck. It was high – you know a tandem truck is a pretty good size truck, and I had to heave that crap way up on top. A lot of it had maggots in it and everything else, an here I am with my bare hands – eewww, ughhh. "

"Dad's trash clients included lawyers, doctors and what not. Many of them were geologists, mineralogists and stuff cuz Trinidad is a very interesting place for that type of profession. Over time they would eventually give me their books – whole volumes – which of course my parents would take away and sell, but I'd sneak a few for myself."

"At night I'd have a flashlight under the covers and start reading. One day I didn't have any light, cuz my batteries had gone dead. So being a smart kid I lit a candle underneath the blankets with my matches, and started a miniature, baby fire. That was the end of my nighttime book reading."

"I used to have these fights with my parents about book reading and stuff at home. So, when I did have time off, I'd go up in the hills. I had my little hiding place where I used to do my prayers and stuff. After prayers I'd start reading these books.

If it wasn't Bobby's dad teasing him relentlessly, it was the kids in the neighborhood and at school. As an only child at the time, he had no other siblings or cousins to defend him. Having gotten a late start in school, Bobby was about a head taller than most of the kids. Being pulled from class to work with his father meant he was not the best of students. Often Bobby could not answer the teacher's questions. When he did try, they were often grossly wrong, creating a wave of laughter from the class. Many times, Bobby would play the class clown to deflect the ridicule. Still the schoolyard taunts ramped up their viciousness.

"Bobby's a bastard! Bobby's a bastard!" An odd word Bobby wasn't familiar with.

This wasn't the first time the boys picked on Bobby. He knew he was under orders not to fight, or he would get in trouble. So, he had to be creative.

"There was this new family that moved in; the Roybulls, very nice family, but the youngest sons used to harass me a lot. I didn't know how to get even without getting into a fight; until I found a Baby Ruth wrapper. During a visit to one of my aunts, I asked her if I could have some of her cooking chocolate. I found a tin can to melt it in, then I looked for 2 perfect turds from my dog Chucho. I covered the turds in chocolate, added a few peanuts on it, stuffed them in the wrapper and left it where those 2 boys would find it. Then I hauled butt man! I heard later they were gagging and pukin so bad – but they never figured out who did it. It was funny I tell ya!"

But pranks or jokes could not deflect all the bullying Bobby endured. Anger builds with every slight, every provocation, and every teasing jab from the other boys. Once Bobby decided to push back, or return a fist, he was faced with harsh retribution from his mom and dad.

"*I was in a bad ass mood I guess, I don't know, but the first blow was right here in my mouth…busted lip. Bleedin all over the place and I got mad – son-of-a-bitch. I beat that poor fuckin kid half to death. I had that kid by the hair – wham! Wham! When I got through with that bastard…I scared him man…he couldn't see outta either eye. They was totally black! His face, his nose was black, his lips were black and blue. Whoo-ah! I scared the shit outta him."*

Bobby's classmates knew very well he was forbidden to fight, so they made a beeline to his house to tell Gertrude. The beaten boy was helped to his house. Gertrude had the whip waiting for Bobby when he got home. The welts rose angry and red on his arms and legs.

"Then here comes the kids old man…he didn't bring nothing cause he knew Gertrude would hand him that damn whip, and that's what he'd beat the shit out of me with. That damn whip…it was only about so long, it just had a handle and the rest was just thongs…and the ends of them had jacks – you know what girls used to play with. That's what they used to beat the shit out of me with."

Bobby stood firm before the vicious pounding and stinging leather straps. The beating stopped only because the kid's dad got tired. Bleeding profusely, he ran outside to hide. That not-so-subtle lesson was seared deeply into Bobby's brain.

During the summer of 1941, Frank had the opportunity to sign on to a timber cutting crew, in Pagosa Springs. He took along his agile, slim 10-year-old son to help top trees. Even though it was illegal for a minor to be so employed, the law was often ignored in the Depression Years. The local lumber mill had cabins where the main crew stayed, and tents provided for the temporary hires. Town was only a few miles away.

Bobby was the one sent up into the tall, swaying lodge pole pines. He carried an ax or bowsaw and the end of a long rope. He would tie off the rope to the trunk, loop it over a lower branch then saw through the trunk above where he perched. After severing the treetop, the crew below could lower it slowly with the rope.

Saturday night; after a long week logging; the men were ready to let off some steam (and pay) at the local dance hall. A big, robust Navajo chided young Bobby to join the guys at the dance. Bobby's cousin Leo (Diego's son) would be going, so it was OK with Bobby's dad. Frank had turned in early, having dived into a bottle of Thunderbird before quitting time.

The burley Indian encouraged the boy to join the men and have a drink with them. At first Bobby was all for being a man and doing manly things. He drew the line, however, when he saw his cousin Leo ask a girl to dance. Girls – ewwww.

The huge Indian goaded Bobby to drink more. As Bobby went out behind the dancehall; feeling he had to throw up; he was escorted by the booze pushing Indian, who soon began fondling him. Bobby shoved away from the big man's advances. Enraged, his tormentor began to lash out at him. Bobby caught a horrible cuffing before running away from the dancehall, and back to the timber camp.

Bobby was winded and crying when he got back to their tent. He had to roust his dad, who was sleeping soundly. An empty bottle of Thunderbird on the floor.

"Dad! That Navajo guy beat the shit outta me!"

Shaking the cobwebs from his head, Frank finally mumbled, "You musta deserved it."

"What!" Bobby screeched.

"Did you hit him back?" Frank asked. Bobby shook his head.

"Then you deserved it." Frank slowly dozed back into oblivion.

Bobby too, was experiencing his own oblivion. The liquor on his stomach rumbled and retched from his small frame. <u>BLECHHHH ! ! !</u> His head spun and his stomach churned. The night melted into a stupor.

The timber crew woke slowly, Sunday morning after the dance. Young Bobby had fully recovered and was vividly reliving the night before. The mockery from his dad, coupled with the beating from the big, nasty Navajo– enraged the boy beyond measure. Grabbing a double-headed ax, Bobby marched over to the men's cabin.

"I went over and knocked on the door. He stepped out and I nailed that damn double-bladed ax (right into) his foot!"

Screaming in pain, the Navajo collapsed back into the cabin.

"*I told him, you ever touch me again and I'll kill you!"*

During the chaos; once free of the Thunderbird's shadow; Frank realized what his son had done and began laughing hysterically.

"That pissed me off. I literally went after my dad with that ax. But Leo kept me from hitting him with it. Dad took off. They fired my dad because he let it happen. So, we came home, and he beat the shit outta me".

Fight – don't fight. The message was clear. You're damned if you do, and damned if you don't.

****

Around 1942, Bobby acquired an old chicken coop. It had belonged to a nearby veteran that lost his leg in the war. It was packed solid with chicken poop and Bobby worked long and hard to clean it out and level the floor. It essentially became a clubhouse for Bobby.

"I could play marbles in there by myself. I was havin a lot of fun and I used to do a lot of things like make an arrowhead collection, which I knew nothing about…only that ancient man-made um. I wanted to know more about these ancient people. So whenever my aunts would come over to take me to their house, way down in Hoehne, CO. I'd ask them about it. They'd come in their horse and buggy, but I liked to ride the horse cuz the buggy bounced too much. Anyway, I learned a few indian tricks from them. How to make mats, sandals, rope and even little toys out of yucca leaves."

"I decided to get my friends, and we'd make a club. We'd call it the BONE CLUB. The reason we'd call it that was I used to collect all kinds of weird bones, and at the library I'd find books that described different types of bones and how they were used by ancient man. I'd start making tools out of bones. Well according to the pictures; cuz the words were so damn long. These were archeology books, which I didn't know what the hell that meant at my age. So, from the pictures I'd make bone awls and needles, plus wood and stone tools. I had a collection of arrowheads, bone, stone and wood tools that I was pretty proud of.

"The Bone Club included Johnny and Mike Lopez, Jerry and Fred Lopez, Albert Alstein and me…but NO girls! They were outlawed! We were all about 11 – 13 years old at the time. I was the youngest. So we got this brilliant idea of digging a tunnel from the dirt floor to the outside, about 40 feet away, next to a juniper tree, so nobody would think there was a tunnel there. So, it was a neat place to have a club, with a secret

passage, in case imaginary enemies would try to invade us. We would plan our strategies as to how we would fight other bad clubs that wanted to molest the girls that lived in Pinon Canyon. Everyone had to donate something for the club to operate properly: money, food, anything. Food mostly because we were always hungry. We would have a meeting every other night…and one day we decided we was gonna have it inside the tunnel…we damn near suffocated ourselves!" We had both entrances closed off. The one inside the chicken shed was pretty well camouflaged, and we all brought candles so we could see. Except for the little room we dug out, the tunnel was pretty tight. Only one of us could crawl through at a time. Ol' Alstein, he collapsed – passed out. That's when we decided something was wrong, so we all got out. Some crawled outside and some came out through the chicken shed. Then we drug Alstein out feet first into the fresh air."

"Still, that club helped save my butt a couple of times…literally saved my butt from getting a whipping from my parents. I'd run and disappear into the chicken shed!"

****

The outside world in the 1930's was scary, downtrodden and covered in dust. The 1929 stock market crash, prohibition and the Dust Bowl prompted Americans to ignore world events in preference to putting food on the table and keeping a roof over one's head. As FDR promoted his "New Deal" here at home: Germany and Italy flexed their muscles and were taking over neighboring countries in Europe.

The Depression years saw the promotion of illegal vices as bootlegging, drugs, prostitution and gambling. Meanwhile, the browbeaten public read about the exploits of Bonnie and Clyde's acquisition of easy money. Even as 70% of Europe's Jews were being slaughtered, the US did not enter WWII until the bombing of Pearl Harbor, HI by the Japanese on Dec 7th, 1941.

Frank had registered for the draft in Feb 1942, as required by law; however, the induction board was unable to locate Frank. He was purportedly in Mexico trying to earn a living, during the years the US declared war. Around this time, Gertrude gave birth to a daughter named Patricia Vallejos.

"After she was born there was no peace in my life. Cause what Patty wanted, Patty got."

After Frank's departure to Mexico in 1942, Bobby was spared the constant berating, teasing and degrading banter from his father. Bobby worked odd jobs to bring home a little money and had more time to devote to school. Taunts from the bigger bullies didn't end and prompted the Bone Club members to form their own gang.

"We'd affiliated a little bit with another club called the 'Cantar Ranas', which means the 'singing frogs'. They were from an old area of town on the far side of Simpson's Rest. There's a kind of stock dam and there was always frogs or toads in there all the time, singing up a storm. There was another real bad gang, the 'Linden Gang'. A whole bunch of them lived on the East side of Trinidad, on Linden Blvd. There was the 'Boulevard Gang' from the West side, across the Purgatory River. Then there was the 'Country Club Hill Gang' but they'd call themselves the 'Terminator Gang'. Well, they never did any terminating on me. Johnny Lopez and I got caught by the gang, but we beat the hell out of them! Me and Johnny took the chains they had away from them and beat um with their own chains!"

"The purpose of our club/gang was to protect all the girls that lived on Pinon St or Pinon Canyon. Because the Linden gang especially used to, uh, run a harem and come after our girls and mistreat them. We wouldn't allow that. We were the good guys; or so we thought. We always had problems with the Linden Gang because their leader's father was the Chief of Police. Anyway, he used to always pick on me. The older son, Bennie Griego, was almost 17 years old. The rest of us all averaged 11, 12 and 13 years old. But that's what we did, protect the girls that wanna go to the movies. I used to luck out, cause they'd pay my way to go to the movies, buy me popcorn or candy. I had it made. The other guys would get kind of jealous, but they understood why…my parents would never give me any money to go anywhere. "

When asked if he was taller than the other boys in his gang…

"Yeah…I was a long string bean. I was tall and scrawny. The work I did hauling coal and garbage, and the training in arrow making I received from Uncle Diego – gave me a lot of power in my arms and hands. My upper torso was pretty strong too. So, when fights would begin, whoever challenged us…I was supposed to be the leader. I never came out of a fight with a bloody nose; I was the only one. Those other guys liked to fight with knives and clubs, in fact…Bennie Griego carried a pistol. I never knew what size it was, but he used to scare the hell out of us. He was crazy enough to use it. He was on drugs also, like his dad the police chief."

"One time Johnny Lopez and I were going over to the Cantar Ranas, because my cousin Betty LeBlanc was going to be there too. One of her friends told us she saw the Linden gang pickin a fight with the Cantar Ranas' gang. So Johnny and I took off. We went over Simpson's Rest; it's a huge hill; it was the shortest route by about 5 miles, to get to the Cantar Ranas. When we got there, my cousin Betty was being beat up by one of the guys. I got pretty mad and jumped on this guy that happened to be Bennie, Bennie Griego. I beat the living hell out of him – broke his arm."

"Still the problem continued, the Linden gang kept going over to the Cantar Ranas area. They were even trying to burn houses down. They were a real bad bunch; nobody liked them. I stayed mad at them for beating up my cousin Betty."

"A couple of months later my best friend, Johnny Lopez and I were going to the movies at the Strand Theater. When we came out from the movie we went to the Savoy Café to eat pancakes. Man, we used to eat pancakes! Old Charlie Rejo, he was the owner, he used to give us a double order, but we'd pay for just one. Of course, Johnny was the one who always paid; I never had any money. We'd get double stacks which was 6 pancakes apiece. Big ones, not tiny ones. We were sittin on the bar stools at the counter, drinkin milk and eaten pancakes, and I'll be damned ol Chief Griego walks in."

'What are you kids doing here? Especially you Vallejos.'

'We're eating.'

'It's past curfew time.'

'No, it's not.'

'Yes, it is, it's 8:00.'

'No, it's not, it was in the Chronical News, its 9:00, and we got a whole hour yet.'

"He didn't say much more, but he had to sit next to me. Jesus Christ, he pulls out this great big Havana cigar, and he was gonna smoke it…lookin for matches. So, like a dumb shit I dig in my pocket for a match and hand one to him. He went to strike it and BANG! Holy shit the chief almost hit the floor. He pulled his revolver out and says, 'You little son of a bitch, you're goin to jail!' So, he threw me and Johnny Lopez in jail for 7 days. Johnny's brothers bailed him out the next day. As for me, I stayed in jail. I didn't give a shit; I got a lot of sleep and didn't have to go to work."

"I was only 13, and he put me in jail for disturbing the peace. Those trick matches I forgot I had in my pocket landed me in jail for the first time…but it wasn't the only time I went to jail."

****

When Frank returned after the war, he and Gertrude dotted on their daughter.

"*Just before I went into the military in 1948 (Patty was about 6 years old) she or my dad broke down the door (to the chicken shed). Patty got in there and destroyed everything. Well, I guess she kept what she wanted…I don't know what she or my dad did with my collection of arrowheads and stuff. But anyway, I was pretty mad. I told my parents about it and they just kinda laughed it off…. that was the end of my Bone Club."*

"Why the hell she hates me is beyond me. She used to hit me over the head with a skillet. My parents thought it was cute. She damn near fractured my skull…I had spells where I didn't know who the hell I was. Maybe that's where the damn brain damage comes from – I don't know."

(Personal Input)

This rough, gregarious environment laid a twisted foundation for young Bobby's personality. His father, Frank, constantly browbeat and teased his son. When Bobby got mad and started swinging, his father would berate him further by asking, "What's wrong? Can't you take a joke?" This bullying tactic became infused into Bobby's personality. Even though Frank only had a second-grade education, he was forever correcting his son in every action. This degrading habit became ingrained in Bob as an adult – to the point of correcting *me* for the simplest of actions, such as how to peel a banana properly! Frustration would cause Bob to flail his arm up; just as his father had done; as a means of dismissing your actions as foolish or stupid.

(End Input)